



Spotlight on Iran

August 28- September 11, 2023

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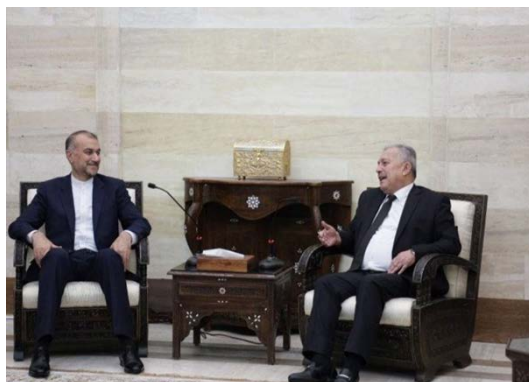
Overview

- ▶ Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian held a several-day visit to Syria and Lebanon. During the visit, the minister met with senior government officials in Damascus and Beirut, Hezbollah's secretary-general, and representatives of the Palestinian organizations, and discussed Iran's relations with Syria and Lebanon, Iran's continued support for the "resistance front," and regional developments.
- ▶ An IRGC member was killed in late August 2023 in Syria. The circumstances of his death were not disclosed.
- ▶ The IRGC and pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria have taken increased security measures in Deir ez-Zor amid violent clashes between Kurdish SDF forces and Sunni Arab tribesmen.
- ▶ About four million Iranian pilgrims arrived at Shiite holy sites in Iraq in early September 2023 as part of the Arbaeen ceremonies, marking the end of forty days of mourning for the death of Shiite Imam Hussein. IRGC's Qods Force Commander Esmail Qaani arrived in Iraq as part of the Arbaeen ceremonies and visited the cities of Najaf and Samarra, as well as the memorial in Baghdad to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was assassinated by the United States in January 2020. Qaani also met with commanders of the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.
- ▶ On September 2, 2023, construction work began as part of the railway project from Basra in southern Iraq to Shalamcheh in western Iran. The project has been discussed for years between the two countries, but so far, no practical progress has been made in its implementation.

Iranian involvement in Syria and Lebanon

- ▶ On August 30, 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian visited Syria. On August 30, the minister met with Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous and his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Mekdad. At the meeting of the foreign ministers, the two discussed

relations between the countries, developments in Syria, and regional and international developments. Abdollahian declared that Iran would continue to support the Syrian regime and the Syrian army until the situation in the country stabilized. He condemned the continuation of the Israeli attacks in Syria, noting that “no aggressive and criminal action by the Zionist regime will remain unanswered” (ISNA, August 30, 2023). In his meeting with the Syrian prime minister, the two discussed the results of the joint economic committee of the two countries, which met in Tehran at the end of July 2023, and the implementation of the agreements signed between Iran and Syria during President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit to Damascus in May 2023. The Syrian prime minister welcomed Iran’s accession to the BRICS and improved relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. At a joint press conference, Abdollahian said that the American forces had to leave Syria and return to their country (Tasnim, August 30, 2023).



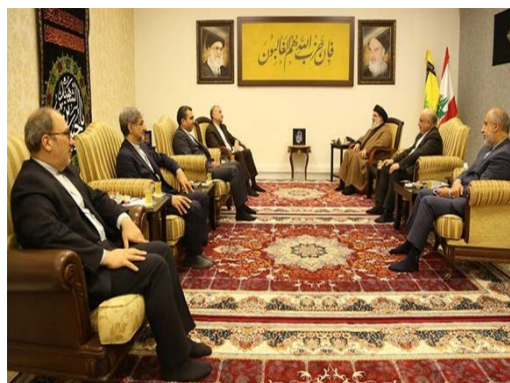
The Iranian foreign minister meets with the Syrian prime minister (Tasnim, August 30, 2023)

► On August 31, 2023, the Iranian foreign minister met with Syrian President Bashar Assad to discuss the situation in Syria, relations between Syria and the Arab League, developments in the Palestinian arena, and regional developments. Abdollahian stressed Iran’s support for Syria and the need to respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity and invited President Assad to visit Tehran. President Assad congratulated Iran on joining BRICS, saying it showed that the world was changing. The president also praised Iran’s initiative to strengthen its ties with Arab countries (Mehr, August 31, 2023).



President Assad meets with the Iranian foreign minister (Mehr, August 31, 2023).

► At the end of his visit to Syria, Abdollahian continued his visit to Lebanon. During a visit to Beirut, the foreign minister met with Saleh al-Arouri, deputy chairman of Hamas’s Political Bureau, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad Secretary-General Ziad al-Nakhalah. Abdollahian stressed Tehran’s adherence to its strategy of supporting the Palestinian people and the “resistance” and referred to the Supreme Leader’s instructions on the need to support the West Bank. The leaders of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad stressed they would not withdraw from the “resistance activities in the West Bank,” which at this stage were a top priority (Fars, August 31, 2023). On September 1, 2023, Abdollahian met with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to discuss the latest political developments in Lebanon and the region (Mehr, September 1, 2023). The foreign minister also met with Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri to discuss regional developments and the “resistance in Lebanon and Palestine.” Abdollahian addressed the political crisis in Lebanon and stressed that electing a president and forming a new government is one of the most important tasks of the Lebanese people and political leaders (Tasnim, September 1, 2023). Meeting with the Lebanese foreign minister, Abdollahian said that Iranian companies were ready to participate in solving the electricity crisis in Lebanon (ISNA, September 1, 2023).



The Iranian foreign minister meets with Hezbollah’s secretary-general (Mehr, September 1, 2023)

► An IRGC member, Yahya Rostami, was killed in Syria. According to Iranian media reports, 50-year-old Rostami was killed on August 31. The circumstances of his death were not disclosed (Fars, September 4, 2023).



IRGC fighter killed in Syria (Fars, September 4, 2023)

► According to a report by the Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat (August 31, 2023), the IRGC and Hezbollah intend to train Russian forces in Syria to operate Iranian Ababil-3 and Qasef-1 drones. According to the report, the attacking drones were transferred by the IRGC from Iraqi territory to the Palmyra military airfield using trucks to transport fruits and vegetables, which are used by the pro-Iranian militias to transport advanced weapons. For the training, the Russian forces have allocated a special place in the field for the UAVs and experts from Hezbollah's Unit 127, the organization's UAV unit.

► On September 7, 2023, the Syrian news channel Ain al-Furat reported on increased security measures by the IRGC in Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria amid violent clashes between the Kurdish SDF forces and Sunni Arab tribesmen in the area. According to the report, the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias set up checkpoints in the Huwaija al-Sakr area in Deir ez-Zor, raised their alert, and reinforced their military positions near the areas where the clashes are taking place.

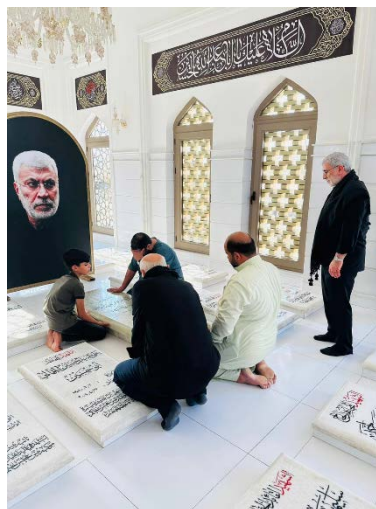
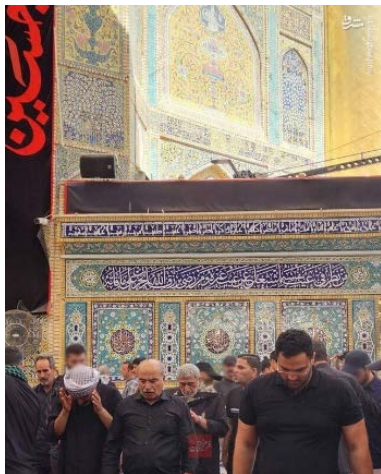
Iranian involvement in Iraq

► On August 29, Iranian Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi visited Baghdad. During his visit, the minister met with his Iraqi counterpart, Abdul Amir al-Shammari, and discussed preparations for pilgrimage ceremonies to Shiite holy sites in Iraq (Arbaeen) and securing pilgrims at the border crossings between the countries (ISNA, August 29, 2023). In early September, some four million Iranian pilgrims arrived at Shiite holy sites as part of the Arbaeen ceremonies, marking the end of forty days of mourning for the death of Shiite Imam Hussein. On September 9, 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi called Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani and thanked him for the Iraqi assistance in organizing the ceremonies (IRNA, September 9, 2023).



The meeting of the interior ministers of Iran and Iraq (ISNA, August 29, 2023)

► On September 4, 2023, IRGC's Qods Force Commander Esmail Qaani arrived in the city of Najaf as part of the Arbaeen ceremonies and prayed at the Imam Ali Mosque in the city (Mashreq News, September 4, 2023). Later in his visit to Iraq, Qaani arrived in the city of Samarra and visited the memorial in Baghdad to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was assassinated by the United States along with Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 (Al-Alam, September 7, 2023). He also met with commanders of the Popular Mobilization, the umbrella framework of the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq (@qods_com Telegram account, September 9, 2023).



Right: Esmail Qaani in Najaf (Mashreq News, September 4, 2023). Left: Qaani in the memorial to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

► Iraqi government spokesman Bassem al-Awadi announced the start of construction work on the railway project from Basra in southern Iraq to Shalamcheh in western Iran. According to Al-Awadi, this is one of the most essential transportation projects in the region and has a significant impact on the movement of passengers and pilgrims from Central Asian countries to Iraq (shafaqna.com, September 1, 2023) The commencement ceremony, held on September

2, 2023, was attended by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, and Iranian Transportation Minister Mehرداد Bazrpash. According to the Iranian vice president, the project of connecting the railway between Shalamcheh and Basra will significantly increase the volume of trade and economic cooperation between the two countries and will facilitate the movement of pilgrims to the holy sites in Iraq. The Iranian minister of transportation said that in accordance with the agreement between Iran and Syria, the railway between Iran and Iraq, expected to be completed within two years, would later connect to Syria as well (Fars; Mehr, September 2, 2023). In April 2023, the transportation ministers of Iran and Iraq met and discussed promoting the project. The construction of the 32-kilometer-long railway between Shalamcheh on the Iran-Iraq border and Basra has been discussed between the two countries for years, but so far, no practical progress has been made in realizing the project.



The commencement ceremony of work on the Shalamcheh-Basra railway project (Mehr, September 2, 2023)

► On September 8, 2023, a delegation of Iranian media officials met in Baghdad with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani. The prime minister stressed the importance of strengthening Iranian-Iraqi ties to enhance regional security and stability (IRNA, September 8, 2023).



Meeting of Iranian media personnel with the Iraqi prime minister (IRNA, September 8, 2023)

► Bafel Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), arrived in Tehran on September 10, 2023, for meetings with senior Iranian government officials (ISNA, September 10, 2023). The visit takes place against the backdrop of Iran's demand that Iraq dismantle the Kurdish separatist groups operating in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq.